

### Searching for an appropriate research strategy on transnational migration: the logic of multi-sited research and the capacity of the cultural interferences approach

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Searching for an appropriate research  
strategy on transnational migration:

The logic of multi-sited research and the  
capacity of the cultural interferences  
approach

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I

In the past ten years the development of the transnational approach on migration (Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc-Szanton, 1994; Faist, 2000; Portes, 2001; Vertovec, 1999) was accompanied by the formation of new methodological positions (Beck and Sznaider, 2006; Pries, 2008; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003). The most important methodological argument refers to the impossibility to restrict sociological and anthropological research on migration to the boundaries of nation states. Social scientists who analyse cultural and social practices of collectives only within nation state frames would disregard the existence of different forms of social life and establish a homogenised view on social reality – this was the main criticism of previous migration research.

Although this critique pushes on modifications of methodological positions and rules in a significant way, it does not pay enough attention to the cultural perspective on transnational migration. Thus, in opposite to postcolonial studies, the interest in culture within the transnational approach is rather restricted (Kivisto, 2001). In addition I propose to distinguish between three ways in which cultural aspects are regarded in transnational research. First of all, culture is often described in the essentialist way<sup>1</sup>. This view refuses to recognize a constructivist character of such phenomena as ethnicity and nation. Moreover, the reference to these categories within transnational activities of immigrants suggests an almost objective nature of them. Second, even if social scientists consider the importance of cultural factors in shaping transnational migration they avoid developing theoretical connections between cultural and other spheres, for instance, economic and political (Portes, Guanizo and Landolt, 1999). Third, transnational researches refer, in particular, to the creolization approach of Ulf Hannerz (1987; 1996). This theory points out the specific non-constant nature of 'culture'. It conceptualises the development of new cultural patterns which emerge on the basis of different cultural orders under global conditions.

However, the aforementioned different conceptual ways of taking 'culture' into account are not acknowledged in methodological work on transnational migration. But especially the genuine cultural access would give a new perspective on transnational phenomena and on methodological ways of studying them. In particular, it can be useful for clarifying a specific methodological question: How to conduct research on transnational practices of migrants, which take place in multiple cultural orders? To put it in other words: Which methodological strategy is appropriate for research on transnational formations (such as transnational networks, families, communities, organizations and diasporas) under conditions of cultural overlappings? Therefore, the methodological proposal developed in this paper focuses exactly on this point. The paper aims to combine both, cultural access and transnational approach, in order to develop a suitable methodology for conducting research on transnational migration. This proposal could be of interest for researchers who are looking for new techniques of data collection and data interpretation which allow them to study transnational activities, transnational life-worlds and transnational forms of mobility. Thus, the term culture can be equated with such terms as meaning patterns (Schütz, 1932), symbolic codes (Levi-Strauss, 1958) or discursive narratives (Foucault, 2002). 'Culture' can also be described as a sense-making and as signifying activity (Hannerz, 1996, Bhabha, 1994). The term also refers to the idea that social structures are always embedded in cultural interpretations. To put it in other words, social practices are always incorporated in settings of culturally rooted knowledge patterns. In addition, the term cultural interference, or cultural overlapping, is related to settings in which actors or certain collectives are confronted with a simultaneous presence of different meaning patterns regarding the same 'object' or 'situation'. My question of interest refers to methodological strategies of research on transnational action patterns which result from cultural interferences. However, this paper does not discuss methodological assumptions related to all kinds of overlappings of cultural models<sup>2</sup>, but only to forms which occur in frames of cross border formations, such as transnational diasporas, communities, families, networks and organizations. Thus, the presented methodology intends, on the one hand, to organize data collection on the basis of a multi-sited research technique (Marcus, 1995). On the other hand, it aims to use the method of scientific hermeneutics (Reichert, 2004) for an appropriate analysis of data.

First, I outline the main assumptions of sociological research on culture and the possible actors' strategies of dealing with cultural overlappings (II). Second, three transnational research strategies are examined: the criticism of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003), the cosmopolitan methodology (Beck and Sznaider, 2006) and the genuine transnational research strategy (Pries, 2008). In this regard I examine the question how the respective methodologies can be connected to culture-oriented transnational research (III). Third, I discuss the multi-sited research technique which changes the procedure of data collection. I also describe the technique of scientific hermeneutics which is important for the analysis of data. (IV). Four, I address the 'problems of representation' within transnational studies. This is why, I propose to increase the extent of reflexivity of transnational studies by organizing the research in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary scientific teams (V). Finally, I draw a brief conclusion (VI).

## II

The methodological strategy proposed in this paper is strongly influenced by cultural sociology. This is why this section discusses the fundamental assumptions of cultural theory which permit to formulate the thesis of cultural overlappings. Furthermore, I argue that cultural overlappings are a core feature of transnational settings, because pluri-local oriented actors and collectives are regularly confronted with a variety of meaning patterns. Thus, I incorporate this thesis within transnational methodology. But before describing this, I outline the core ideas of cultural sociology which are crucial for my approach.

According to Alexander and Smith (2002), the only productive way to analyse cultural processes is presented by theories which define culture as a sphere which is not determined by social structures. While the "sociology of culture" tends to explain cultural phenomena by referring to particular socio-structural facts or causes<sup>3</sup>, the "cultural sociology" aims to describe cultural elements as tools which direct patterns of action. From this perspective 'culture' is understood as an "independent variable" within the relationship of social structure and cultural sphere (Alexander and Smith, 2002: 136). Similarly Andreas Reckwitz (2001; 2006) points out that the 'strong version' of cultural sociology defines social practices as being guided by cultural patterns. In this case the theoretical distinction between culture and

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agency is replaced by the distinction between cultural patterns and respective types of social practices. However, cultural orders cannot be empirically observed independent from social practices, so to speak as separate entities. Instead, cultural drafts are always expressed by meaning patterns situated within social practices (Reckwitz, 2006: 589).

The logic of cultural sociology, in opposition to the above mentioned sociology of culture, requires avoiding the so-called homogenous notion of culture (Reckwitz, 2006: 619). This access is partially included in different approaches<sup>4</sup> and primarily based on three assumptions. Firstly, it presupposes that cultural orders are characterized by internal consistency and closure. Secondly, it refers to the specific understanding of cultural reproduction, which claims that, in contrast to cultural innovation, the unmodified transmission of cultural patterns is the common logic of cultural dynamics. And, thirdly, it suggests that cultural orders are strictly connected to particular social groups of representatives. From this point of view cultures can only be studied in particular collectives and cannot simultaneously be shared by different groups.

Andreas Reckwitz, who has worked out the weaknesses of the homogenised perspective on culture, pleads for more attention to the globally spread processes of cultural overlappings (Reckwitz, 2001: 189). According to him, we need a new more open definition of 'culture' today. Firstly, we have to regard cultural phenomena as internally fluid and inconsistent. Secondly, we have to assume that cultural models can be shared through different collectives which act in orientation towards them. Consequently, this access gives us the possibility to imagine the "simultaneous existence of different cultural models in the mental structure of singular collective" (Reckwitz, 2006: 628). Thirdly, the current cultural approaches have to develop terms for conceptualising the innovation dynamics of culture(s). Moreover, they have to disregard the idea of cultural reproduction as a continuous reiteration of uniform cultural patterns<sup>5</sup>.

This criticism of the homogeneity approach of culture is directly linked to the idea of cultural overlapping. Especially the second, aforementioned, thought hints at the crucial role of interpretative activities of actors who are confronted with a variety of different meaning patterns regarding the same 'object' or 'situation'<sup>6</sup>. Thus, the term meaning pattern refers to

the common meaning of a respective social interaction or communication; the meaning pattern combines different aspects of meaning into specific drafts. Such interpretive frames can be observed in linguistic and non-linguistic expressions (Reichert, 2004).

In this regard I argue that situations of cultural overlappings are a crucial attribute of transnational spaces, because cross-border circulations of commodities, artefacts, ideas and people potentially increase the dynamics of cultural transfer, translation and exchange. To put it more precisely, cross-border mobility enhances the probability of cultural encounters. But this thesis does not stress that 'cultures' are directly linked to nation states. In opposite, cultures, as mentioned above, are non-homogenous and non-territorialized entities which are always embedded within patterns of action and framed by specific historic contexts<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, the cultural interferences approach raises new questions within the research on transnational migration. Firstly, in which manner do transnational actors deal with a simultaneous plurality of cultural patterns? Secondly, can the 'old' drafts, in which people are socialized, be replaced by new ones within in a short time? Do respective groups combine different meaning patterns, or do they reject the 'guest-land' orientations? Thus, these questions could even serve as a guideline for research on transnational formations if we focus on the more general question: Which new social practices and action patterns result from situations of cultural overlapping?

Concomitantly, I propose to take the thesis of cultural interferences as a key guideline for developing a new methodological proposal which can be used for research on transnational formations. But before focusing on this, I want to outline three possible options of actor's dealing with cultural overlappings (Reckwitz, 2001: 192)<sup>8</sup>. The first strategy refers to situations in which actors combine different cultural schemes to a new one. The production processes of such innovative meaning patterns are well-known as creolization (Hannerz, 1987, 1996). The second strategy is also related to the context in which people or groups have access to multiple cultural schemes referring to the same 'object' or 'situation'. Thus, in this case actors try to redefine the usage criteria of meaning patterns<sup>9</sup>. Concomitantly, actors modify the validity contexts of cultural models and tie their usage to the new contexts. In other words, different cultural drafts are not modified into a new draft, but are used depending on their new usage criteria<sup>10</sup>. Thirdly, one can observe situations in which ambivalent frames of action become constant. Under such circumstances actors whose



meaning patterns are characterized by multiplicity continue to be uncertain about the respective usage rules and contexts. This cultural position is discussed within the cultural approach of Homi Bhabha (1990, 1994) who uses terms like *hybridity* and *cultural translation* to clarify ambiguous situations in multiple cultural contexts.

To sum up, the central idea of the cultural overlappings approach is that different ways of dealing with cultural interference, in consequence, condition different types of social practices. This access enables a specific cultural-sociological explanation which describes transnational patterns of action as a result of cultural dynamics. This is why a study of cultural drafts and their application by actors becomes the focus of culturally oriented transnational research. Besides of that, all three possibilities of dealing with cultural overlappings outlined above are temporary arrangements. One has to mention that under specific conditions the second and the third method of dealing with cultural overlappings can be transformed to the first and vice versa.

Thus, this article focuses on developing a methodology which makes it possible to study action routines, life-worlds and mobility trajectories which result from overlappings of knowledge patterns. It is also interested in methodological assumptions concerning actor's ways of dealing with a plurality of cultural orders. For this aim I am going to combine the method of scientific hermeneutics with current transnational research methodologies. This is why the next section of the paper gives an overview of current methodological strategies used for the research on transnational migration.

### III

During the last 10 years there were successful attempts to develop research strategies on transnational migration (Beck and Sznaider, 2006; Pries, 2008; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003). Thus, before I present the culture-oriented methodological proposal, I aim to identify the most useful elements of these methodological strategies. Therefore, my analysis of current transnational methodologies focuses on the question: whether and in which way transnational methodologies consider the idea of cultural overlappings. Which important claims concerning techniques and units of research do they offer? Firstly, I give an overview about the criticism of nation-bounded research ways and its methodological consequences (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003). This criticism has stimulated the formation of the cosmopolitan approach (Beck and Sznaider, 2006) and of the relational concept of transnational space (Pries 2007, 2008), which are analysed in the following.

Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2003) were those of the first researchers who criticized so-called methodological nationalism. This modus of research restricts theoretical and empirical analyses to the borders of nation-states. The main assumption of methodological nationalism is that social reality solely consists of nation-states. Additionally it is based on the notion that nation states are founded around nation collectives with a common history and traits. Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller differentiate between three types of methodological nationalism within migrational research. Firstly, they argue that classic migration studies do not pay attention to nationalism and its effects on nation-building processes in current societies. From their point of view sociology defines “the limits of society as coterminous with the nation-state, rarely questioning nationalist ideology embedded in such founding assumption.” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003: 579) Secondly, they point out that nation-states are often understood as natural entities. In particular, this analytical limitation is conditioned by the relationship between nation-state authorities and social science. On the one hand, funding programmes of social science are in general governmental: thus, nation-state related topics are in the focus of the research agenda. On the other hand, teaching programmes of universities remain state-dependent because generally universities cooperate with the government’s education authorities. Thirdly, they assume that social research focuses primarily on territorial boundaries of nation-states. But the ‘territorial limitation’ of power relations is a historically new phenomenon which emerged in the processes of nation-state establishment, whereby the latter has determined itself in cross border power dynamics and activities: The origins of nation-state formations are not rooted within geographically limited territorial entities but can be found in the cross border transformations of imperial and colonial power (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003: 581)

Although this criticism does not directly refer to the idea of cultural interferences, it stresses the possibility of plural or even multiple memberships conditioned by cross border activities of transnational migrants, families, organizations and diasporas. It forces research to acknowledge at least the possibility of a simultaneous sharing of different ethnic, national and religious belongings. To conclude, from the perspective of cultural sociology the proposal developed by Nina Glick Schiller and Andreas Wimmer can be interpreted as a statement against an equation of cultural models and the frames of nation states. Cultural drafts cannot necessarily be connected to selected nations. In opposite, meaning patterns can be shared by different groups and, in this sense, virtually cross borders of nation states.

Although the criticism of methodological nationalism is recognized in migration studies, it does not offer a detailed improvement. Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider (2006; 2007) strive to achieve exactly this progress by developing a concept of methodological cosmopolitanism. The advantages of a cosmopolitan methodology are established in three ways of argumentation: firstly, in the examination of philosophical origins of cosmopolitanism<sup>11</sup>; secondly, in the empirical diagnoses of world transformations, which, according to Beck and Sznaider, can only be described as “cosmopolitanization”<sup>8</sup> and; thirdly, in the methodological procedure itself. Therefore, I am going to pay special attention to the last point.

The methodological principle of cosmopolitanism refers to the ambivalence of multiple identities which is caused by the increase of the world-interdependence. It acknowledges that under the new conditions individuals hold several memberships in different spheres: they affiliate with multiple ethnic, national or religious belongings. The methodological recognition of the ‘both/and’-principle refuses the old-fashioned ‘either/or’-principle of methodological nationalism which reflects the nation-bounded perception of a social world.

Beck and Sznaider argue that a new methodological position may help to deal with some of the current difficulties of globalisation and transnational studies. One of the main research problems is, therefore, a clear analytical differentiation between the global/local and national/international research levels. This problem is conditioned by the old nation bounded research perspective which determines a necessity to think in “clearly differentiated oppositions” (Beck and Sznaider, 2006: 18). In contrast, the new ‘both/and’ logic of methodological cosmopolitanism allows to structure the research in “multi-perspective” ways: firstly, by focusing on multiply-located strategies of actors and, secondly, by referring to multiple ways of observation.

Thus, the inclusion of two perspectives – actor and observer – within the methodological assumptions forms the basis of methodological work. This new access allows a simultaneous examination of similar phenomena from different analytical angles. For instance, the transnational lifestyles of migrants can be analysed by focusing on different levels: a) the local level, observing migrants’ participation in their places of living, b) the national level, the research and comparison of transnational life-worlds in different nation-states, c) the transnational level, researching the mobility of persons, goods and ideas from one national

context to another and back, d) the global level, observing global changes of nation-state politics caused by transnational political, economical and cultural practices of migrants. However, this methodological proposal is at an early stage of development. Consequently, the resulting questions, currently without answer, are: “How can (...) [the] politics of perspectives be made transparent and methodologically tractable?” (Beck and Sznaider, 2006: 18)

To sum up, the methodological strategy developed by Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider includes the idea of a plurality of personal identities and social roles across nation state borders. Consequently, the cultural sociology approach can use such an access and design a picture in which individuals or groups are able to simultaneously share different meaning patterns. That is why the assumption that current transnational practices are guided by the both/and–rule of dealing with cultural drafts has to be in the centre of cultural oriented transnational methodology.

Although Beck and Sznaider’s proposal offers the multi-perspective oriented technique which seems to gain importance for future transnational studies, the authors’ information about appropriate research units remains limited. In contrast Ludger Pries has developed a more suitable strategy for a selection of transnational “units of analysis” (Pries, 2007). Pries, who does not use a philosophical foundation for his argumentation, understands “units of analysis” as analytical items about which scientific declarations are formulated. Previously, when ‘container’ oriented methodology was taken for granted, the appropriate “units of analysis” in social sciences were restricted by frames of nation-states and were not put into question. Nowadays, this access becomes more and more unacceptable. This is why Pries uses an analytical differentiation between the relational and absolutistic understanding of social space (Pries, 1999)<sup>13</sup>. Thus, he defines them as “transnational social relation[s]” which can be understood as “relatively dense and durable configurations of transnational social practices, symbols and artefacts” (Pries, 2007: 2). Pries insists that absolutistic geographical categories can no longer be used as socio-spatial references (i.e. counterparts) of scientific statements. Because the dimensions of space can only be described as discontinuous, the socio-spatial references of analysis have been transformed to pluri-locally situated social spaces which are produced by transnational practices.

In search for appropriate units of analysis, Pries suggests to put the transnational research strategy in contrasts to the research methods of other types of international studies, such as world society studies and cross-national comparison studies (compare Table 1).

(Table 1)

To sum up, the peculiarity of the transnational approach results from the analytical relationship between the unit of analysis and the unit of reference. While cross-national comparison studies directly relate units of reference to the “container-model” of nation-states, in world-society studies the units of reference are restricted by macro-regions and their long-term transformations. According to Pries both approaches presuppose the convergence of geographical space and social formations. To put it in other words, the social formations (be it a nation-state or a core/periphery-structure) are restricted by geographical boundaries. In contrast to this ‘absolutistic’ understanding of social space, the transnational approach uses, as mentioned above, the relational concept of socio-spatiality. Consequently, “(t)he units of reference, by definition, are considered as pluri-local and geographically dispersed, distributed and non-contiguous, but socially more or less homogeneous and coherent societal units.” (Pries, 2007: 9)

In opposite to the cosmopolitan concept, the methodological proposal of Ludger Pries gives reasonable orientation for an appropriate design of transnational units of analysis. It can also specify units of transnational oriented research on cultural overlappings. From this position, not all kinds of dealing with cultural overlappings have to be examined but only those forms which arise in context of cross borders activities.

The overview of transnational methodologies points out the necessity of continuous transformations of our research methods and techniques. In particular three points have to be stressed in this regard. Firstly, it is an increasing agreement in social science today that we cannot use the nationally bounded research strategies, which according to Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003), are expressed in different forms. We also have to be especially careful in the field of diaspora studies and have to avoid a homogenised perspective focused on these types of transnational formations. Secondly, we need a methodological access to “multi-perspectively” constructed societal realities. This is why, the methodological proposal of Beck and Sznaider (2006) offers, despite its normative assumptions, a new possibility to differentiate between “multiple strategies of actors” and “multiple observation ways” of them. According to Beck and Sznaider both dimensions have to be taken into account simultaneously. But unfortunately the cosmopolitan approach does not give enough hints at how to realize such a multiply oriented programme in research praxis. Also a precise selection strategy of suitable research units is not explored in detail. In opposite to the cosmopolitan concept, the methodological concept proposed by Ludger Pries (2007) gives a reasonable orientation for an appropriate creation of transnational units of analysis. Pries’ definition of research units<sup>14</sup> as relationships, which have their socio-spatial reference in

pluri-local, non-homogeneous, “societal spaces”, results from his theoretical assumptions about relational quality of socio-spatiality. Although Pries questions the boundaries of the transnational approach and suggests paying more attention to the interconnectedness between transnational and non-transnational formations, he does not express such interdependences in greater detail.

The access of cultural sociology to transnational methodology can take hold of these ideas in a specific way. It suggests to change both the methods of data collection and interpretation. Firstly, according to Ludger Pries’ (2007:7) definition of transnational “units of reference” as “border-crossing, pluri-local societal spaces”, the collection of data has to be conducted in various localities on the basis of the multi-sited research technique (Marcus, 1995). Secondly, I propose to use scientific hermeneutics to modify the way of data interpretation. It is necessary to transform this technique in accordance with the cultural overlappings approach which has conceptual similarities with Beck and Sznaiders’ methodological proposal described above. Thirdly, a necessity of multiple research angles stressed by Beck and Sznaider (2006) can be understood as a requirement for the increase of methodological reflexivity. Also this point has to be added to cultural oriented transnational methodology by organizing the research in cross-cultural scientific teams (V). I am going to elaborate on these important points in the following.

## IV

One possibility to avoid methodological nationalism and to consider multiply oriented actors’ strategies is to add the idea of cultural overlappings to transnational methodology. Thus, I aim to apply this idea to the method of scientific hermeneutics. First of all, I would like to describe the standard procedure of scientific hermeneutics. Second, I suggest changing the ways of data collection of this procedure. Third, I argue for a transformation of the data interpretation method of this research strategy.

The hermeneutic sociology of knowledge<sup>15</sup> seems to be the most suitable research technique for conducting a study on transnational action patterns which result from different forms of cultural overlappings. The scientific hermeneutics<sup>16</sup> are consistent with the cultural approach described above because they are based on the idea that action patterns are always embedded in processes of sense-making and interpretations of meaning (Hitzler and Honer, 1997; Reichertz, 2004; Soeffner, 2004). This assumption is also the reason for the interest of scientific hermeneutics in the reconstruction of meaning patterns, which, on one

hand, guide action and, on the other hand, are expressed in action. Additionally this approach aims to study processes of interpretation of meaning patterns, i.e. the usage and acquisition of cultural drafts by actors. Although the research has to be conducted from the actor's perspective, the approach does not aim to interpret subjectively intended meaning. Therefore, this approach does not regard it important whether meaning patterns are consciously perceived by actors or not (Reichert, 2004).

In general this procedure can be applied to "all kinds of social interaction and all types cultural phenomena" (Reichert, 2004: 578). But my question of interest is, how can scientific hermeneutics be opened for the research on cultural overlappings under transnational conditions? Firstly, the process of data collection has to be reorganized in accordance with the multi-sited research approach currently used in the transnational research (Hendry, 2003; Marcus, 1995; Mazzucato, 2008). Secondly, the data analysis has to regard possible overlappings of meaning patterns in transnational contexts. Before describing this, a brief overview explains the procedure of scientific hermeneutics.

The procedure of scientific hermeneutics includes four stages. First of all, the research team starts with the collection of data, which needs to be conducted in a mainly non-standardized way<sup>17</sup>. The aim behind this course of action is to avoid that data collection is immediately directed by research assumptions. Otherwise researchers would foremost collect the data which matches the theoretical background but does not offer new insight into social reality. At the second stage, after the collection of data, the research team starts with the analysis of data by using the so-called sequence analysis. The sequence analysis begins with the selection of text passages which are important for the research question. Afterwards every sentence and even every word of the selected passage have to be analysed with the aim to extract the meaning pattern within the text. During the second stage researcher try to develop as many different versions of potential meaning patterns of the respective text parts as possible. At the third stage, researchers validate the appropriation of previously developed versions of knowledge patterns and reject them if they are not reasonable. In case that some versions are congruent with the text structure, they will be selected as appropriate meaning patterns. Afterwards this technique is applied to the whole passage and than to the entire text. In ambivalent cases it is recommended to collect data repeatedly. At the fourth stage the knowledge patterns, which are accepted as proven, have to be connected to one pattern and described in the research records. This concluding configuration of meaning is accepted as a result of a data analysis (Reichert, 2004).

It also has to be added that such analyses are carried out by a group of researchers because the group interaction allows a more or less valid exclusion of unsuitable meaning drafts. In

this context the term 'suitable' refers to the meaning pattern which reconstructs the text passage in the most appropriate way, in comparison to other formulated interpretive versions. The extensive development of different meaning drafts aims to exclude subjective prejudices from the analytical process. Apart from this, strategies of self-reflection have to be considered during the analysis. On the one hand, the researcher needs to have an inner distance to his/her own cultural and historical background. And on the other hand, the background of the respective 'life-world' has to be precisely described in the research records<sup>18</sup>.

My proposal aims to modify the ways of data collection of scientific hermeneutics. Thus, I suggest organizing the collection of data in accordance with the multi-sited research technique. I argue that the employment of multi-sited research results from the relational understanding of socio-spatiality stressed by Ludger Pries (1999, 2008). This form of data collection allows creating transnational units of analysis as analytical items whose spatial reference is rooted in geographically spread and pluri-locally organized spaces. Thus, multi-sited research was originally developed within anthropological research and referred to the difficulties to find plausible reasons for the research on small and traditionally rooted groups in a contemporary, globalised world in transformation (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Consequently, the problems of a suitable construction of a research field were discussed (Nadai and Maeder, 2005). In this context the strategy of selecting plural localities for research work became one of the appropriate solutions of anthropological field construction (Marcus, 1995).

The multi-sited research method changes the core procedure of anthropological research deeply. First of all, multi-sited research supposes that ethnography should not focus on the description of face-to-face interactions of small groups in one locality because such interactions are situated in a 'global' 'emergent' context. Consequently, it aims to observe social practices that are produced and situated in different locations at the same time. Secondly, this method reduces the role of traditional fieldwork in anthropological research. The latter took it for granted that researchers have to stay in the respective field for two or more years in order to 'dip' into the culture they are interested in. But applying this procedure to fieldwork in plural localities would take an impossible number of years or even decades. The limitations of fieldwork, which consequently arise, can be solved by splitting up the research attention: while, for instance, the research activities in the first location can be comprehensive, the research work on the second or third 'site' can be restricted. Thus, such limitations depend on the research question.



The construction of multi-sited fields can obtain different directions. Apart from the focus on the circulation of metaphors and stories, the reference to biographical narrative or to conflict is also possible (Marcus, 1995). Especially the focus on people's mobility is a preferable research access in transnational studies (Gupta and Ferguson, 1999). The multi-sited research technique widens the social scientific methodology by considering complex transnational linkages. Different 'trajectories' of action, for instance, of transnational families, communities, organizations and diasporas can be indicated by the study of social practices in different localities (Mazzucato, 2008).

Apart from changing methods of data collection, I propose to use a modified form of data interpretation. According to Beck and Sznaider's (2006) methodological access to transnational practices one has to consider that pluri-locally organized strategies of actors are guided by the so-called 'both/and'-rule of social interaction. To put it in other words, actors develop routines of action which allow them to simultaneously participate in different meaning systems regarding the same 'situation' without necessity to make a final decision of preference. This idea is even better expressed in the cultural interferences approach. Its incorporation within the procedure of scientific hermeneutics improves ways of data interpretation. As described above, the aim of scientific hermeneutics consists of the specification of one extensive meaning pattern which is used by respective group of actors. Thus, meaning patterns or knowledge patterns are understood as frameworks which guide processes of understanding or interpretation in the respective social contexts (Reichert, 2004). Using the access of the cultural interference approach, I aim to change the methodological procedure of scientific hermeneutics by producing not one singular knowledge pattern as a result of analysis but by the extraction of a variety of meaning patterns. This modification refers to the assumption that in situations of 'inter-cultural' contact overlappings of meaning patterns are probable. Subsequently, the overflow of meaning is a decisive attribute of this setting. Faced with an overlapping of meaning patterns, actors and collectives are confronted with an interruption of action routines; however, action can only be continued in the case of successful sense-making. In other words, the reproduction of action is only possible, when actors manage to reduce contingency.

The aim of this interpretation procedure consist not only in the extraction of a variety of meaning patterns regarding the same 'object' or 'situation' but also in the description of actors' applications of respective cultural drafts. As described above (II) we can differentiate between at least three ways of dealing with contingency caused by cultural overlappings. The first option refers to the possibility of a fusion of meaning patterns and is, therefore, described in the creolization approach. The second way refers to the possibility to re-define

the usage criteria of the cultural drafts. Finally, the third option, which was theoretically specified in Bhabha's hybridity approach, is related to the stabilization of insecurities regarding the appropriate application of meaning patterns. Consequently, the contribution of scientific hermeneutics to the study of transnational migration consists of research on ways actors deal with various meaning patterns regarding the same 'object' or 'situation'<sup>19</sup>. In other words, one has to focus on the following questions: In which ways do actors apply different meaning patterns and which social practices result from situations of cultural overlappings?

## V

Apart from a modification of methods of data collection and interpretation the proposed methodology has to regard a reflexive turn within current sociological and anthropological research (Clifford 1988). This is why this section focuses on suitable forms of research organization. According to the procedure of scientific hermeneutics, one of the usual ways to increase reflexivity of previous individual and scientific knowledge is to conduct empirical research in a group of scientists. The mutual questioning within a scientific team enables a specification and subsequent avoidance of previous convictions. Regarding the proposed methodological strategy, the reflexivity will rise if transnational research is conducted by cross-cultural and interdisciplinary scientific teams. Thus, the term 'cross-cultural' refers to ways scientists are socialized and not to their national or ethnic status. This way does not aim to re-essentialize research strategies but to enable mutual control of participants.

At the same time this form of research organization deals with the 'representation problem', which is primarily discussed within current anthropology (Clifford, 1988; Clifford and Marcus, 1986). This claim is rooted in anthropological self-reflection of 'representation' ways of 'foreign' cultures by 'western' scientists. Therefore, a discussion of a 'crisis of representation' discloses central dichotomies of the anthropological perspective as a division between 'us' and 'them' and its inherent interest in the 'disclosure' of 'sameness' and 'otherness' which is rooted in its colonial past (Argyrou, 2002). However, this discussion led to a break with the anthropological ambition to produce universal knowledge and encouraged the aspiration for new modes of representation. There are two new strategies to be named which aim to re-negotiate the dialectics between the researcher and his or her counterpart. The first, the so-called 'dialogic methodology', tries to overcome the distinction between ethnographer and 'native'. That is why, the transcriptions of participant observations and interviews, which are marginally loaded with scientific comments, are the result of data collection (Dwyer, 1982). The second, the so-called 'collaborative methodology' aims to include the 'native position'

within anthropological text and equalizes it with the researcher position. While the 'native' interviewer produces the text by speaking, the ethnographer records it and gives only few scientific comments about it (Crapanzano, 1988). Both methodological notions emphasise, on the one hand, the necessity to avoid the over-generalization of research results and, on the other, the problems of overall questioning of data. 'Local voices' are the final results of research which is based on 'dialogic' and 'collaborative' methodology (Smith, 1989). These examples point towards the aim of my proposal, which is to organize transnational research in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary teams: First of all, this research form intends to increase mutual questioning within the process of data interpretation. Secondly, it enables to restrict the production of 'universal knowledge' by an incorporation of the 'Other' within a scientific context.

At the same time we have to acknowledge that also new modes of representation of 'Other' are the result of scientific communication. That is why, the self-reflection of social and anthropological research continues to be unavoidable. Thus, the 'problem of representation' cannot be solved either, the 'modernist' way – by aiming at a 'better' representation, or the poststructuralist way - by sacrificing authorship<sup>20</sup>. Instead, we can only be aware of it and at least to try to increase the extent of reflexivity.

## IV

Which advantages does the theoretical basis of cultural sociology offer for designing a transnational methodology? First of all, it enables a specific view on transnational formations and describes them as entities which are developed out of a confrontation of various cultural drafts<sup>21</sup>. Because the cultural access presupposes a specific relationship between 'culture' and 'agency', it offers a specific kind of description of transnational practices.

The research based on this methodology does not regard transnational practices as a result of cross-border circulations of people, commodities and ideas. Instead, it analyses social trajectories and dynamics of cross-border circulations of people, commodities and ideas as a consequence of actors' dealings with the interferences of knowledge orders. From this point of view, transnational social configurations are, under specific conditions, the result of continuous negotiations between, and transformation of, diverse cultural patterns. Subsequently, in contrast to a pure description of different kinds of transnational practices, the presented methodology provides explanatory advantages by disclosing different cultural

schemes actors are confronted with and by shedding light on the ways actors manage cultural ambivalence.

To sum up, the cultural oriented methodological strategy opens up new ways to research on transnational formations and practices. It aims at widening the procedures of scientific hermeneutics in an appropriate way. Firstly, the data collection has to be organized with regard to multi-sited research. The strategy enables to avoid methodological nationalism, to consider the relativistic quality of transnational settings and to design the transnational units of analysis. Secondly, I propose to apply the interpretation procedure of the scientific hermeneutics, described above, with one change: In accordance with the cultural overlapping approach, the procedure cannot be finished with the formulation of one, but several meaning patterns. This change permits to study actors strategies which are oriented to the 'both/and' rule of social interaction described by Beck and Sznaider (2006). Thirdly, in order to increase the extent of reflexivity, I suggest a reorganization of research work into cross-cultural and interdisciplinary-organized scientific teams. This change would increase the probability to observe complex cultural dynamics and their effects on cross-border social practices.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> For the criticism on the essentialist concepts of culture see Sokefeld (2006).

<sup>2</sup> The combination of different cultural drafts is also usual within the nation state context. For instance, one can find an example for the transformation of different habitual orders to new ones within one nation state frame in Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984).

<sup>3</sup> As examples of such inconsequential cultural approaches, Alexander and Smith (2002) mention the neo-structuralism approach and its further developments by Michel Foucault, the Cultural Studies approach of Stuart Hall, and the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (Alexander and Smith, 2002: 140).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the approaches of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and Charles Taylor (1992) equalize in some statements the boundaries of meaning patterns with the boundaries of collectives, i.e. social classes or particular 'ethnic' groups (Reckwitz, 2006: 543).

<sup>5</sup> Terms such as cultural drafts, cultural models, cultural orders, knowledge patterns and meaning patterns are used in this text interchangeably.

<sup>6</sup> Whereas the sameness of the 'situation' or 'object' is perceived by actors and not by researchers.

<sup>7</sup> One can also assume that actors or collectives without a transnational background can be confronted with the overlapping of cultural orders. For instance, the members of respective social milieus within the context of nation states are able to perceive a plurality of cultural routed habitual orders. The cultural overlappings in transnational settings, in opposite to cultural interferences within the national context, are influenced by an inconsistent and plurilocally organized cultural apparatus, such as education facilities in different nation states, cross-border epistemic regimes of truth production, religious institutions and media representations.

<sup>8</sup> Actors do not have to be understood as subjects but as “carriers of social practices” (Reckwitz, 2006) or as “imaginary constructions” (Schimank, 1988). This thesis is rooted in the idea that the same actors can participate in different kinds of social practices.

<sup>9</sup> The term ‘usage criteria’ was developed in the context of the ethno-methodological theory. It hints at the fact that cultural knowledge is always bounded to at specific contexts and that actors always have an implicit knowledge about suitable application of meaning patterns. The ethno-methodological term ‘framing’ refers exactly to the usage criteria of meaning patterns (Goffmann, 1959; Goffmann, 1974; Garfinkel 1976).

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Ghanaian-British transnational migrants, who have two different cultural drafts about the role of medicine and functions of healing methods, use some of these methods only in the context of medical facilities of their home country and others only in the context of the country of destination (Krause, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> The origin of normative cosmopolitan notions is situated in Hellenistic philosophical teachings which include the core ideas of Stoicism and neo-Platonism. The central notion, therefore, is related to the possibility of plural memberships of social actors: “Every human being is rooted by birth in two worlds, two communities: in cosmos (that is, nature) and in the polis (that is, the city-state). Being part of the cosmos means that all men and women are equal by nature yet part of different states organized into territorial units (polis).” (Beck/Sznaider, 2005: 159) These thoughts first influenced the universal oriented Christian dogma and later ideas of European Enlightenment.

<sup>12</sup> This term describes the dynamics which are caused by “really-existing relations of [world-] interdependence” (Beck/Sznaider, 2006: 9).

<sup>13</sup> While the absolutistic concept of socio-spatiality assigns a geographical ‘container’ to every social formation, the relational understanding of socio-spatiality presupposes the fluidity and inconsistency between social formations and their geographical references.

Consequently, different types of social formations can hypothetically share the same geographical container or, the other way around, the selected social formation can be spread over different geographic-spatial units.

<sup>14</sup> Here the phrase “units of research” is used synonymous to the term “units of analysis”.

<sup>15</sup> The theoretical and methodological ideas of the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge are mainly spread in German-speaking sociological communities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland (Reichert, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> The term hermeneutic sociology of knowledge and scientific hermeneutics are used interchangeably in this text.

<sup>17</sup> Data can be gathered in interviews and participated observation, but also by content analysis of documents and bureaucratic files.

<sup>18</sup> The proposed methodology cannot only be applied to studying cultural scripts within social practices of the less institutionalised life-worlds, but also for research on formally well organized institutional spheres of politics, economy, education etc.

<sup>19</sup> It is actors and not researchers who perceive the similarity of ‘situation’ or ‘object’, to which different meaning patterns are applied.

<sup>20</sup> This way was proposed by Jacques Derrida (1976), who periodically refused authorship.

<sup>21</sup> I do not insist that all transnational formations are confronted with cultural overlappings. Instead, I stress that a confrontation with cultural plurality is more likely within transnational frames.

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